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# Blessed Are They Who Are Persecuted, for Theirs Is the Kingdom of Heaven:

Religious Resistance among Coptic Christians in Egypt



**SIDA Minor Field Study**  
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At a memorial service for the victims of a terrorist attack that claimed the lives of twenty-two people, an angry crowd chants, "We will sacrifice our blood and our souls for the Cross!" The attack took place during the midnight mass that marked the Coptic Christians' New Year celebration. The suicide bombers delivered their deadly message shortly before the end of the mass. It is 2011 and it is the first the first day of the New Year when a Coptic friend and I are watching the memorial service on TV from a living room in Upper Egypt. She is smiling and crying silently. She turns to me and says, "Look! They are not mourning, they are celebrating." My friend later told me that the wife of one of the deceased had worn white clothing instead of black to celebrate that her husband now resided in the Kingdom of Heaven. What these people were celebrating in this strange intermingling of anger, tears, and pride, was the martyrdom of the departed. The bishop of the diocese is leading the prayers. Eventually, however, he breaks down in tears and another member of the clergy continues the prayers in his place. This man later ends the ceremony by giving a standard greeting, thanking President Mubarak for sending the mayor to represent him. The crowd starts shouting, "No, no, no, we will not thank Mubarak!" My friend looks at me with great surprise and informs me that the crowd's behavior is highly controversial. Many Copts hold negative sentiments towards the regime. However, they are rarely expressed publicly in this way. The crowd continues shouting about the mayor, accusing him of being involved in the attack. The rumors of the mayor's involvement were because he was supposed to have been in the church to greet the Christians at the time of the explosion, but instead of following these traditional procedures, he had chosen to give his New Year greetings earlier that day. The anger of the crowd forces the mayor to flee from the room, and the memorial service ends as the coffins of the martyrs are carried away.

Why do the Copts celebrate their dead instead of mourning them? Why is there such distrust in the government? What function does religion have in a society that gives birth to these phenomena? These are enigmatic questions that are rooted in deeper questions relating to the ontological perceptions of the believer. How does he or she view their sociopolitical reality? What cosmological ideas are prevalent? Most importantly, how do these ideas interact? The reason why the Copts celebrate the deaths of these people is related to the sociopolitical conditions of Egypt, their cosmological perceptions, and the function of religion in the Egyptian society. The Copts' celebration of martyrdom is an act of resistance against what they perceive to be an oppressive social system and should be understood as a refusal to assimilation. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the ontology of the Copts influences their resistance against this perceived oppressive social system.

This thesis examines the forms of resistance prevalent in the Coptic Christian community in the conflict with the Muslim majority. In my research, I have examined the dynamic between

cosmological ideas of the Copts and the sociopolitical conditions of Egypt. The Coptic Christians have been accused of contributing to their own marginalization in society by clinging to their social isolation and excluding themselves from politics (Sidhum in Scott 2010:177). It could seem as though they have adapted to a role as the passive victim. In contrast, the Copts generally claim that the conflict is getting worse. They perceive that the violence against them is increasing and that they face more hostility in their society. Consequently, either the Copts have indeed adapted to the role as a passive victim, or their resistance has taken another form than a conventional political or social movement. Therefore, I have examined if acts of resistance can be found outside the political and social spheres. When analyzing the Copts' ontological understanding of reality it appears as though they do not perceive politics as the only forum in which they can achieve social change. This thesis answers the following questions:

**1. What factors have contributed to the fact that the Coptic population rarely has chosen to resist in conventional social and political spheres?**

**2. What form has their resistance taken instead?**

In response to my first question, I argue that the Copts perceive that there is a discriminating culture against Christians in important state institutions and within the overall society that has contributed to their choice to withdraw from social and political spheres. The Copts feel that this discriminating culture is due to ideas within Islam that are hostile against Christians. Due to this perceived hostility and discrimination many Copts fear that open resistance would have serious repercussions. In response to my second question, I argue that central elements within the Copts' religious life during the last decades can be regarded as a religious resistance movement. Religion has become a path for resistance because within the Copts' cosmological perception of reality devotion to God in times of hardship will salvage the soul of the believer or even change the path of history.

In the following section, I describe the research methods used in this study. In section three, I present the theoretical background of my argument. I begin this section by discussing a theory that argues that forms of resistance can be found outside political spheres. Furthermore, I illustrate the importance of ontological understandings when studying conflicts in religious societies. Section four summarizes the history of the sectarian conflict. The fifth section describes the religious social organization of Egypt. I illustrate that religion has a communal function that shapes the nature of the conflict. In section six, I identify factors that have contributed to the Copts' choice to withdraw

from the social and political spheres of society. In section seven, I argue that the Coptic religious revival has central elements to it that can be seen as a religious resistance movement. Furthermore, I examine central symbols and myths within this movement that communicate ideas of resistance.

## **2.0 METHOD**

My aim in this section is to create a transparency in the research process. I begin by describing the field where I conducted my research. I also describe the methods I used which were participant-observation and interviews. My final topic in this section is the limitations of my study.

### **2.1 The field**

This research is based on an ethnographic field study in Egypt. The field study lasted for nine weeks and took place in three different sites. Since my informants have requested to remain anonymous, I do not name some of these sites. My primary site was a city in Upper Egypt, where I stayed in the household of a clergy member. Staying with a clergy member allowed me to quickly gain trust within the Coptic community. The disadvantage with this arrangement was that I mostly spoke with people whom were active members of the Church. It is generally understood that the sectarian tension is worse in Upper Egypt than in the metropolitan cities. Jayson Casper, who works for the Arab West Report, an organization that monitors Coptic-Muslim relations, claims that the tension is worse in these areas because the state is more absent, the population is poorer, and a higher percentage of Christians lives there (Casper 2011). However, my informants repeatedly pointed out that the relationship between Muslims and Christians were better in their city compared to neighboring cities in Upper Egypt. The second site was an isolated Christian organization. Being there allowed me to interview Coptic Christians with more socially diverse backgrounds than my informants in Upper Egypt, and to learn more about the Coptic Orthodox dogma. The third site was Cairo. While there, I interviewed experts in the field and performed participant observations at religious sites that are important to the Copts. Traditionally, anthropologists tend to stay in one community for an extended period of time to gain in-depth data about the informants' everyday lives. I concede to that my choice not to do so might have lost me some in-depth analysis on the subject; however, I feel that since the conflict is not geographically isolated to one particular city it would be a very static frame of mind to isolate my research to one city. As the influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz said, "We don't study villages, we study in villages (Geertz in Tucker 1997:13)." In retrospect, I feel that the decision to split my time had many advantages; such as allowing me to see how the conflict affected different social groups and gaining more knowledge

about the Copts' faith.

## **2.2 Participant-Observation**

Participant-observation is a method where the researcher participates in the life of the people he or she is studying. In my observations, I have studied power relationships, ways of provision, social structures, and dominant ideas governing society. The general idea behind participant observation is to take the role of the learner rather than the teacher because one must understand a cultural reality before one can begin to pose the right scientific questions (Agar 1986:12). The researcher must search for the question as well as the answer. The major strength of the method is that it allows the researcher to learn aspects of a phenomenon that cannot be learned through questionnaires and other more conventional research methods (Malinowski 1922:18). By living with the group that one is studying it is possible to attain more in-depth knowledge about their everyday life (ibid.7). Participant-observation, therefore, allows one to gain a greater insight to the emotions involved in the issue, which is important since human behavior is not strictly governed by our intellects (Agar 1989:43).

The major weakness with my choice to use this method is that I do not speak Arabic. So regrettably, a lot of the information on everyday situations was lost to me. I did not have any permanent employed translators, but often had friends translating for me. The main weakness of the method itself is that it does not capture the scope of a phenomenon. The purpose of the method is not to produce quantitative data such as statistics. For example, participant-observation is not an appropriate method to determine what percentage of the Copts feel that they are discriminated on a regular basis. Hence, I do not discuss the breadth of the conflict, but the nature of it. I hope this study gives a fair representation of how many middle class Copts experience their reality in terms of how they perceive the sociopolitical climate and their cosmological understandings.

## **2.3 Interviews**

The purpose of the anthropological interview is to collect data on cultural information, such as life stories, worldviews, customs, and beliefs (Haviland et.al 2008:55). Anthropologists generally use two types of interviews, informal and semi-structured. Informal interviews involve data collection through conversations, and can be conducted anywhere. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher generally uses prepared questions and takes extensive notes (ibid.54). The questions are usually open ended in order to let the informant govern the content of the interview as much as possible. The questions also vary in relevance to who the researcher is interviewing. The researcher may use follow-up questions when something is unclear or of particular interest (Laforest et al

2009:4). For this study, I have conducted interviews with two main categories of informants: informants who have professional interest in the conflict and informants who are members of the Egyptian Christian community. The interviews with the Coptic community were spontaneously organized, and the informants were selected because they spoke English. I occasionally used interpreters, but abandoned this strategy because the interpreters often started to argue with the informant. In all, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with members of the Coptic community, of which most of lasted about forty-five minutes to an hour. The topics were how they perceive their relationship with the Muslim majority, the state, and the importance of certain religious symbols and myths. I had four interviews with experts. These interviews were semi-structured and the questions varied in relevance to the person's particular area of expertise. Two of the informants were people whom work for peace building organizations in Egypt, another informant was an expert on Coptology, and the final informant was an author on Coptic-Muslim relations. In addition, I conducted dozens of unstructured interviews where I asked a certain informant specific questions about a cultural phenomenon which they would have knowledge on. I also gathered information via the many daily encounters with informants.

The major weaknesses in my interview method were language and representation. The problem with language was that the English skills varied between informants, and many of them would have been able to express their point of view more clearly if they had been able to communicate in their native language. The other weakness is representation is that because I mostly spoke to informants who knew English, the elderly and the peasant class were underrepresented because they generally only speak Arabic. The elderly might have had important information on the conflicts development since many of my younger informants claimed that their older relatives felt that the relationship between Muslims and Christians were better when they were young. In my interviews, I did not conduct any semi-structured interview with people from the peasant class. One member of the clergy said that the conflict affects the peasants more emotionally because they do not have the intellectual tools to analyze it. Therefore, individuals from the peasant class might have given a less intellectual interpretation of the conflict, and perhaps had a more spiritual and emotional interpretation of the conflict. This contrasts with my middle class informants, who although they often identified ideas within Islam as the key issue, often brought up sociopolitical empirical factors contributing to the conflict such as problem with political underrepresentation.

## **2.4 Limitations**

This study has three major limitations: time period, representation of the Copts, and representation of the Egyptian population. Firstly, in January of 2011, thousands of Egyptians protested against Mubarak's regime. The demonstrations started shortly after I left Egypt. This uprising eventually forced Mubarak to resign from office. This was a historical event in Egypt and is likely to change the power structures within the country. Therefore, the data presented in this study, particularly the data concerning the government, is representative of the time before the demonstrations. A second limitation is representation. In this paper, since most of my informants are Upper Egyptians, middle class, and more or less active Church members, these are primarily the ones I am referring to when using the generalizing term "the Coptic community." These are also the people that are of most interest in my study since they have been important in the revival of the Coptic Church. I have little anthropological data on upper class Copts from metropolitan areas. Many upper class Copts have a more secularized lifestyle, and would probably have a less religious interpretation of the problems in the conflict. The peasant class is also underrepresented in this study; however, their perception of the conflict is probably more similar to the middle class perception of the conflict than the upper class. This is because the secular ideas generally supported by the upper class require an education level that the peasant class does not have. Therefore, they are more likely to understand the conflict in religious terms rather than secular. Lastly, I have not interviewed any Muslims for this study, because I suspected it would make it more difficult to gain trust in the Coptic community. I also had the limited duration of my field study to consider and wanted to maintain focus on the Coptic community. I will, however, briefly describe ideas within political Islam when it is necessary to understand the Copts' ideas on a topic.

## **3.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

My argument in this paper is influenced by James C. Scott's theories of resistance and Bruce Kapferer's ideas on the dynamics of religion and nationalism. Scott's ideas are essential since his research focuses on non-confrontational forms of resistance. This perspective is important since many Copts are afraid of speaking openly about the conflict, fearing that confrontational resistance would have serious repercussions. However, his research focuses on mainly on class conflict, and is therefore, not fully applicable to the conflict in Egypt as the Coptic community is not a separate economic class. Therefore, Kapferer's explanations of how cosmological principles interact with political ideas are critical to understand the underlying mechanisms of the conflict.

### 3.1 Theory on Resistance

Scott criticizes mainstream theories of resistance. According to the mainstream theory, acts of opposition must be organized and large enough to threaten the state in order to qualify as resistance. He claims that this definition is influenced by lingering leftist romantic ideals of wars of national liberation (Scott 1985:28). Scott argues that the problem with limiting the scope of resistance to large-scale political movements is that suppressed classes rarely have the luxury of organized resistance. Open resistance of a repressive social order can be dangerous for the individual or even suicidal (ibid. XV). When organized resistance happens it is usually crushed long before it reaches the history books and has catastrophic effects for the individual (ibid.29). Hence, the research on resistance needs to move beyond the scope of rebellion and also focus on the mundane forms of everyday resistance (ibid.29). Scott's thesis is based on his study of class conflict among peasants and landowners in Malaysia. He finds that these peasants practice a type of everyday resistance that includes elements such as foot-dragging, slander, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, and sabotage. The advantage of these forms of resistance is that they require little or no coordination or planning and avoid direct confrontation with authority (ibid.29). Consequently, to understand class conflict, one must study the oppressed class outside the arenas of upper class power since everyday forms of resistance are unlikely to be observable there. However, Scott claims that this should not be interpreted as a romantization of these methods because they rarely achieve change (ibid.30). His point is that the research on resistance must have a focus that is broader than the effects the resistance has (ibid.331).

In his review of Scott's work, Michael Adas claims that Scott's analysis has strong empirical dimensions and that Scott makes a convincing argument for social scientists to study what appear to be these banal phenomena of class struggle (Adas 1987:151). However, he feels that Scott does not make a satisfactory argument of where the boundary of resistance lies. What separates the ordinary thief, from someone who steals with the intention of resisting an oppressive class structure? Adas argues that this lack of distinction risks diluting the analytical categories of resistance (ibid.151).

In this thesis I have used Scott's argument that resistance must have a broader definition than the results resistance has, and that one must look for resistance outside conventional social and political forums. For example, on several occasions when the Copts have openly resisted through demonstrations it has resulted in arrests or even violence. The political climate is so sensitive that if the Copts were to found a separate Coptic party, whoever held a rank in that party would most likely be killed (Scott 2010:179). The Copts, therefore, face many difficulties with open resistance,

and Scott's theory of searching for more non-confrontational forms of resistance is applicable. Due to Adas's critique of Scott's work, my thesis also requires some distinction of what is defined as resistance. The essential problem with Scott's work is that one cannot easily determine the intention of the actor in committing an act such as sabotage. The difference between a common act and an act of resistance is the intention of the actor and what the action is intended to communicate. Acts such as petty theft and sabotage will not be a part of my analysis because it is very difficult to determine the intention of the actor. Instead, I will mostly be analyzing the religious celebration of symbols and myths, focusing on what the celebration communicates. Through analyzing this message, the intention of the actor is more easily grasped. Therefore, my definition is somewhat narrower than Scott's is.

### **3.2 Theory on the Influence of Cosmology in the Formation of Nationalist Ideas**

Kapferer writes about the connection between nationalism and cosmology. According to him, nationalism is an ideology created by Western society that has been exported to the world through the expansion of the capitalist system (Kapferer 1988:19). The idea of nationalism was not uncritically adopted by non-Western societies. In these societies, the ideas that constitute nationalist ideology became fused with the cosmology. Nationalism and cosmology cannot be understood separate from each other because together they constitute an ontology (ibid.20). For example, Kapferer studied the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and found that the logic of the conflict is governed by both political and religious reasoning (ibid.29). The Sinhalese population is Buddhists and within this cosmology, one's identity is determined by one's place in the social order (ibid.11). This social order is governed by divine principles of hierarchy (ibid.11). These divine principles have now been infused with the modern nation state. Generally, Buddhist mythology speaks of evil as a force that comes from outside the society and tries to disrupt the divine hierarchy (ibid.22). Furthermore, when evil appears in the myth, it is generally stricken down violently (ibid.62). Consequently, the Sinhalese interprets the Tamil's struggles for independence as an evil force disturbing the divine hierarchy, and therefore, they violently fought the Tamils. Their cosmological understandings strongly influence their perception and behavior in the conflict.

In his review of Kapferer's work Michael D Woost claims that he poses many of the right questions (Woost 1994:913). However, he criticizes the assumptions Kapferer makes in his analysis. Primarily that he treats the cosmology of the Sinhalese as a monolithic system and does not take into account differences within the group. Furthermore, Woost claims that Kapferer's argument of the connection between cosmology and nationalism obscures other factors influencing the

nationalist ideology such as discursive practices on gender and family (ibid.913).

I agree with Woost that Kapferer poses many of the right questions. The questions of how cosmological perceptions influence modern ideas of nationality and how these ideas influence the actors within a particular society are important questions indeed. In my work, I use Kapferer's theory as a tool to understand the importance of cosmology in the Copts' creation of a nationalist identity. Furthermore, the Egyptian state and its negotiation between Islamic ideas of citizenship and secular ideals very clearly illustrate the importance of cosmology in modern state building. Regarding the critique on Kapferer's works I hope to avoid a monolithic interpretation of the Coptic community, because I do not claim that this research is representative for the entire community but a large scale movement among the Copts. Regarding the importance of other discursive elements in the formation of nationalist ideology such as ideas of gender and family, I would argue that in Egypt these discourses are highly infused with religion to the extent that it makes them difficult to separate.

### **3.3. Conclusions**

In this study, I analyze forms of resistance that are non-confrontational. In the context of the political climate for the Copts in Egypt non-confrontational means forms of resistance that are exercised outside the political sphere. As I made clear in my introduction, I have identified forms of resistance in the religious life of the Copts. I will be analyzing certain religious symbols and myths that express resistance against what the Copts perceive as an oppressive social system. Therefore, I have also found Kapferer's ideas on the importance of understanding the ontology of the actors useful. I will analyze how cosmological ideas relate to the formation of nationalist ideologies, and how cosmological beliefs influence the behavior of the actors in the conflict.

## **4.0 HISTORY OF THE SECTARIAN CONFLICT**

The conflict between Muslims and Christians in Egypt is the result of a long and complex history. Here I focus on three main historical themes that can help us understand the current situation of the Copts in Egypt. These themes are: firstly, the Muslim overtaking until the Colonial Era, secondly, the Colonial Era until the Free Officers Revolution, and finally the Free Officers Revolution until the end of Mubarak's regime.

#### 4.1 The Muslim Overtaking until Colonial Era

At the time of the Muslim overtaking in 641 Christians constituted around 80% of Egypt's population. The social status of the Christians would come to change when the Muslims came to power (Henderson 2005:156). Within Islam, there is a concept, *dhimma*, which refers to non-Muslims living in a Muslim country. The term means the protected people and essentially preaches tolerance against other religions; however, it is a form of hierarchic tolerance (Scott 2010:22). The *dhimma* was linked to the *Jihad* theory and the obligation for Muslims to either by force or persuasion convert non-believers to Islam (ibid.17). The Christians that did not convert had to submit themselves to their Muslim rulers and pay *Jizya*, a poll tax placed on the *dhimma* (ibid.16). Many Christians converted and about 300 years after the Muslim conquest Christianity was no longer the majority religion in Egypt (Makari 2000:89). The Muslims then started to refer to the ones that had not converted from Christianity as the Copts. The original meaning of the word referred to the inhabitants of the Nile valley, but now it has become synonymous with Egyptian Orthodox Christians (ibid.89). The level of discrimination against the Copts varied under the Muslim rule. The difference had to do with whether or not the ruler at the time viewed Egypt as an autonomous regime or a part of the Sunni Empire. When the ruler viewed Egypt as a part of the Sunni Empire the Islamic identity of Egypt became important. This idea of citizenship excluded religious minorities (Zeidan 1999:54). Other factors that have been contributing to sectarian tension are economic factors, times of social crisis, and rulers manipulating religious interests in order to gain support (ibid.55). During the colonial era, France initially occupied Egypt. Then it was claimed as a part of the Ottoman Empire. The final colonial power to claim Egypt was Great Britain in 1882 (Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2010). What is important to remember is one of the reasons why this conflict is so difficult to resolve is due to this long history of sectarian tension. The Copts were in the early Islamic state treated as second-class citizens. From early history, their status within the Egyptian society has been connected to the state's varying relationships with Islam. Many Copts see the Egyptian history as colored by cycles of Islamic oppression against them.

#### 4.2 The Colonial Era until the Free Officers Revolution

The British were mostly interested in using Egypt for cotton production, and neglected the domestic economy (Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2010). This eventually led to an uprising among the Egyptians headed by two major parties: the nationalist party *al-Hizb al-Watani*, and the *Wafd* party. The nationalist party promoted a liberal Islamic state (Makari 2000:92). The *Wafd* party consisted of both Christians and Muslims and wanted a secular state. The parties had

one thing in common; discontent with their colonial rulers. Independence was eventually won in the year of 1922, and in the following year, the constitution of Egypt was written. The constitution was overall secular in comparison to the previous one. During this time, the Copts had a high degree of political participation (Scott 2010:40). However, the constitution was clear on one important point, that Islam would become the official religion of the state (ibid.93). In 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded, and the political debate concerning Islam's role in the Egyptian state became increasingly conservative. This led to a decline in the secular agenda which had been dominant during the revolution. This decline was reinforced by the weakening of the *Wafd* party which had problems with internal strives and disagreements with the monarch. As a result, there was a rise in sectarian tension. This religious political agenda would soon come to change. In 1952 Gamal 'abd al-Nassir and his "the Free Officers Revolution" overthrew the monarchy and took power (ibid.94). Two things are important to remember. Firstly, that when secular ideals governed the state the Copts had a high degree of political participation. Secondly, the secular ideals of state became less important as the support for political Islam grew.

#### **4.3 The Free Officers Revolution until the fall of Mubarak's Regime**

Nassir promoted what he called Arab Socialism. Because he himself was a socialist, he did not promote a religious state, and had a relatively tolerant view towards religion. However, Nassir's ideology had elements of national romantic propaganda, which emphasized the Islamic heritage as a part of the Egyptian identity. This identity was often portrayed in juxtaposition towards the Western world (Makari 2000:94). Nassir died in 1970 and was succeeded by his Vice President, Anwar as-Sadat. Islam became a way for Sadat to legitimize his own rule and use the right wing to fight leftist elements within society. The defeat against Israel in 1967 had the effect that many Egyptians feared that the defeat was a divine punishment for the Egyptians lack of faith (ibid.95). Sadat used these sentiments and portrayed himself as the protector of Islam, and was often seen on public television worshipping during the Friday prayers (ibid.95). In addition, in 1971 Sadat changed the constitution of Egypt. His first amendment to the constitution was that principles of sharia law should be one of the main sources of legislation. This amendment was again changed in 1979 to a stronger statement where he made sharia law *the* main source of legislation. The exact amendment reads: "Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic is its official language and principles of Islamic laws are the main sources of legislation" (ibid.95). He also frequently attacked the Coptic Church in public speeches where he claimed that they were conspiring with Egypt's enemies against the state. Furthermore, he released many of Nasir's political prisoners from Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Zeidan 1999:57). These factors gave rise to anti-Coptic sentiments and sectarian

violence. In June 1981, this culminated in the worse communal violence Egypt has seen in modern times. A Christian man shot at a group of Muslim men who had occupied his land. The Muslims intended to build a mosque there to prevent him building a church. In response, Muslims set fire to Christian houses and barricaded the doors so that the residents could not escape. Christian shop owners were disemboweled, and Christian children were thrown out of windows (Hasan 2003:109). Sadat's regime blamed the sectarian tension on the Coptic pope and sent him into exile; the regime also incarcerated 170 bishops and priests (ibid.109). The Copts claimed that the police were responsible for the degree of the violence since they did not intervene until the situation had already spun out of control (Boles 2001:26). Ironically, Sadat was eventually assassinated by a Muslim extremist due to his political allegiance with the United States (Makari 2000:95).

Hosni Mubarak succeeded Sadat in 1981. At the time of the research, Mubarak was still in office; he was forced to resign in January of 2011 due to massive protests against his regime (Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2010). Ever since taking office, he ruled the country under martial law, under the pretext of fighting extremism. Therefore, Mubarak and his closest circle made all the important decisions. The regime was highly totalitarian and the party totally dominated the domestic politics (ibid). The government was widely unpopular among the majority of Egyptians whom were tired of the negligence and corruption. The conditions of the Copts improved under Mubarak in comparison to Sadat's rule. His regime took actions to fight Islamic extremism. In this process, he cooperated with the Islamic moderates to isolate and crush extremist elements. Nevertheless, this cooperation also led to a continuation of the discriminatory trends within the political sphere (Zeidan 1999:57). It is difficult to deny that the Christians have been increasingly marginalized in the Egyptian society during the last decades (Hasan 2003:3). The International Religious Freedom Report of 2010 claims that although the Egyptian constitution provides religious freedom, it is not followed in practice. Christians are discriminated in the labor market and education system. The state does not recognize conversions from Islam to Christianity, and those who still convert are often persecuted. The attacks on Christians are becoming more severe and frequent. The director of Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination stated in January 2010 "I think the sectarian violence, or rather the violent attacks against non-Muslims in Egypt, has been escalating in the past year " (U.S. Department of State 2010)." For example, there have been lethal attacks with many casualties against Coptic Churches during important celebrations two years in a row.

Since the 1950's, Egypt experienced significant economic and social changes. The country has had a rapid industrialization and urbanization in combination with an enormous population growth

(Zeidan 1999:55). These factors have all led to a high unemployment rate and a deterioration of the social conditions for many Egyptians (ibid.55). Political Islam is seen as an oppositional force to the regime (ibid.55). In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood has gained increased political importance during the last decades. Since its founding, the Brotherhood has become increasingly liberal and gained much popular support within a wide variety of social classes. Through their sociopolitical programs of aiding the poor, they are seen as addressing problems that the government has not (Scott 2010:53). They were also a crucial element in the successful outcome in the protests that managed to force Mubarak out of office. It is unclear how the revolution will come to affect the Copts' situation. The Copts I have spoken to feel positive about the movement towards a more democratic society, but are concerned about the role what role the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam will have in the new Egyptian state.

#### **4.4 Conclusions**

The sectarian conflict in Egypt has a long history. The conflict has not been constant since there have been times of peace. The level of sectarian tension has largely been due to whether the contemporary rulers has seen Egypt as an Islamic state, or based citizenship on indicators other than religion. In modern times, the Egyptian state has had varying relationships with Islam. After the Revolution of Independence secular ideals dominated; however, the secular ideals declined and religion is again a determining factor for citizenship. Furthermore, political Islam is widely supported among the population of Egypt. The religious tension has been further aggravated by the overall decline of Egypt's the sociopolitical conditions. Sadat's regime contributed to a drastic increase of sectarian conflict. A conflict that became somewhat better during Mubarak's rule; however, sectarian tension still remains.

### **5.0 RELIGIOUS IDEAS IN THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF EGYPT**

The last part of my background illustrates that the social organization of the Coptic community is strongly influenced by religious ideas. One must understand the importance of religious ideas in the social organization of Egypt in order to comprehend why individual disputes between Muslims and Christians sometimes turn into sectarian conflicts. Furthermore, one must understand how the Coptic community functions in order to understand how they perceive the conflict. Therefore, I firstly discuss the importance of religion in the formation of kinship lines. Secondly, I discuss the central role the Church plays in the life of the Coptic community.

## 5.1 The Religious Kin

In Egypt, kinship lines are formed on a religious basis. From the moment that you are born, you have a religious identity. For example, in the Coptic Church, baptism and confirmation are performed during the same ritual. In comparison to other Christian traditions, such as the protestant, there is no ritual where the believer must confirm one's faith. The institutional world also reflects how central religion is to one's identity since one's religion is also stated on one's national ID card. Marriages are also formed on a religious basis, because both Muslim and Christians family law prohibits Coptic Men from marrying Muslim women (U.S. Department of State 2010). When I asked a priest why this law exists, he explained that in Coptic Christianity marriage is seen as a relationship between not two but three parts. These parts are man, woman, and God. Therefore, he claimed, a marriage between a Muslim and a Christian would be blasphemy since they do not believe in the same God. A married couple is integrated in a kin who consequently also shares the same religion. In an unorganized economy such as Egypt, the kin serves fundamental economic and social functions. The purpose of cultural traditions where religious groups only marry each other is to ensure that the religious solidarity in the community is maintained throughout generations (Leach 1976:68). The religious identity is a factor that maintains solidarity within the kin, and in addition, the Coptic community. In kinship societies individuals strongly identify oneself with one's kin. Therefore, any attack on the individual is also an attack on the kin. This phenomenon is further strengthened by Egypt's culture of honor. So, an attack on a Christian could be seen as an attack to that individuals kin, and the entire Coptic community. Conversely, a crime committed by a Christian, could result in violent retribution against the Coptic community or Coptic churches.

## 5.2 The Church's Importance for the Coptic Community

The leadership of the clergy serves an important purpose for the Coptic community. The Coptic community relies on their clergy to lead them because it is believed that they hold deeper understandings of God's will (Meinardus 2006:23). The clergy of the Coptic Church is highly revered by their congregation. The priests are generally chosen among the community for their great devotion and trust within their community. Becoming a priest is considered a great responsibility towards one's community because a priest is expected to devote his life to the task. When Copts have a social encounter with a clergy member they kiss his hand, the same sign of respect they give relics and icons. Furthermore, one must understand that this guidance is not only sought in religious matters. The Coptic confession differs from the Catholic because its emphasis is rather on life guidance than repentance. Copts seek the wisdom of their priest to advice them in difficult decisions. For example, many women seek advice from their priest about whether they

should marry a proposer. The guidance of the clergy is not only important in individual matters; the Copt also relies on them to lead them as a community. During the recent decades, the clergy led by Pope Shenouda has been an important political representative for the community. Just how important this function is can be seen in an incident that occurred after Christmas Mass. At the time, there was a threat from a terrorist network directed toward all the Coptic churches in Egypt, which had been preceded by a terrorist the attack against a church in Alexandria. After the service ended, the young men of the congregation formed a human shield around the clergy in order to protect them from potential attackers. When I asked one of my informants why they would choose to do this she responded: "We all feel that we can die, but we can't lose them. It's like you can die but your children can't. They are our fathers and we are their children, but in some aspects it's the other way around." Conclusively, the Copt's social system is dependent on clergy to lead them both as individuals and as a community.

The Coptic Church also has important social functions. In addition to their religious role, the Church often also provides different social services. This is particularly true in the poorer villages in Upper Egypt where the state is largely absent and the church might be the only social gathering place. One priest whom had built a church in a poor village in Upper Egypt said the following:

"I started from zero, but I had a vision of this beautiful church. Before I came there was no spiritual people, no church, and no servants [of God]. This was empty land. Because I told you that Christian people in Egypt are unhappy without a priest and a church. Maybe it is less important to people in Cairo because they have clubs and other places to go to, but in Upper Egypt, the church is everything. When the church is open, the people go outside to come here. The church is a gym, it teaches the girls handicraft, and it offers education. Before the church, people here were lost. Where are you going? They were not happy. You could see it in their eyes."

The same church also offered help to the poor, daycare, and recreational activities; it is soon to offer health care to those who could not afford such services. This is not an isolated phenomenon to this particular church, but many Coptic churches provide similar services. Conclusively, the Church provides the Coptic community with many services that in wealthier societies generally are provided by the state. This fact also puts another perspective on the difficulties Copts face when building churches. The legal problems Copts have with building churches will be further described in the following chapter.

The importance of the Church has increased during the last decades as the social segregation in society between religious groups has worsened. The Copts are integrated in the economy, and there are generally no separate Coptic residential areas, the segregation is of a social character. Most of

my informants said that they interacted with Muslims professionally, but not privately, because the religious tension was too difficult to overcome. It should be noted though that some of my informants also claimed that they had Muslim friends so there are individual differences. The social segregation is worse in poorer rural areas than metropolitan areas. Munīr Fakhrī ‘Abd al-Nūr, secretary general of the liberal Wafd party, says that for most of Egyptian society:

“There is a major cut and break in the texture. . . . Muslims and Copts are not mixing together anymore. . . . They don’t mix in my constituency. I can see that I can feel that. I go and sit in the cafes in the small streets of the very, very popular quarter. There are no Copts. I go to the churches, you find all the Copts there where they do everything (Munīr Fakhrī ‘Abd al-Nūr in Scott 2010:71).”

The clergy has been accused of encouraging this segregationist behavior, in particular the political retreat, since within Coptic Christianity it is seen as a sign of godliness to withdraw from society (Scott 2010:77). When I confronted a member of the clergy with these accusations, he felt that these accusations were unjust and that the segregation of the Coptic community has to do with fear. He claimed that people go where they feel safe and if the Coptic young men would feel safe to go to the football field they would do so rather than play in narrow back alleys. This fear is also something that became very evident in my interviews. For example, one of my informants claimed that if he were to invite a Muslim to his home the Muslim would take advantage of the situation by finding out ways to harm him and his family. Conclusively, because the Copts feel threatened by the Muslim community this has increased the importance of the solidarity within the Coptic community and the Church’s political and social functions.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

Social organization in Egypt is part of a religious logic. General the religious communities marry among themselves, and in a kinship structured society this constitutes a significant social divide. This is founded in a belief that marriage is a divine contract, and therefore, the belief in God is present in fundamental social structures of society. The commitment to their God is also evident in the importance the Coptic community place on the leadership of their clergy. The Church also has many social functions, which consequently also constitutes a religious logic in the social organization. These social functions have become more important as the Coptic community has become increasingly segregated in Egypt. What is important to understand is: firstly, that this divide exists; secondly, that Egypt is a highly religious society where difference in the ideas of what constitutes the ultimate truth, are important enough to create this divide in society. This complex

interaction between the individual, the kin, the Church, and religious beliefs is the reason to why individual disputes sometimes escalate into violent clashes. Within Egyptian culture, an attack on the individual can be interpreted as an attack on the entire religious community and the religious beliefs it embodies.

## **6.0 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE COPTS' SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION**

In this section, I examine what factors have contributed to the fact that the Coptic population rarely has chosen to resist in conventional social and political spheres. I illustrate that the Copts claim that they are being denied political participation, rather than choosing not to participate. Furthermore, they experience that they are systematically being discriminated by the security apparatus and the juridical system. They perceive that this discriminating culture within these central state branches derive from the main problem which they perceive to be Islam itself. They feel that there are ideas within Islam that are hostile against Christianity. Therefore, they have not chosen these forums of resistance. Furthermore, they experience that they are being met with discriminating and sometimes even hostile attitude from the majority of the Muslim community. They experience these attitudes as threatening and have, therefore, chosen to withdraw from many of the social spheres of society. Furthermore, the fear of violent retribution of extremist Islamic elements is a contributing reason why Copts generally do not resist in confrontational ways. The final factor contributing to the Copts inability to resist through conventional social and political spheres is an internal disintegration of their community caused by the many conversions and the mass migration of Copts from Egypt. Therefore, this section examines the Coptic perception of the state, the Muslim community, and the disintegration of the Coptic community.

### **6.1 Views on the State**

I will now discuss the three parts of the state that the Copts most often identify as problematic: the government, the security forces, and the juridical system.

#### ***6.1.1 The Government***

In my interviews, I found that many Copts feel that they are being treated as second class citizens, and are being discriminated by the government because they will not give them proportional representation. The Copts only hold 2% of the seats in the parliament although they are estimated to make up around 8-12% percent of the population (U.S. Department of State 2010). The

exact percentage is unknown since the government is unwilling to release any form of official statistics on how many Copts there are (Scott 2010:8). Since Nassir's regime, the Copts have been denied positions of power, except a few symbolic nominations. This has not been an official policy, but remains in the political culture of Egypt (Zeidan 1999:58). One of my informants said: "In general they say we are together and have the same rights, but in fact it is not like this. In fact the big positions are for them." Furthermore, to reserve positions of power for Muslims is something that has been in Egypt's history long before Nassir and has to do with a historical tendency in the Middle East to base citizenship on religious rather than geographical borders (Kumaraswamy 2006:64). This is because in classical Islamic jurisprudence there is an idea that non-Muslims should not be in a position in society where they have power over a Muslim (Scott 2010:108). This is due to the Qur'anic verse: "And never will Allah grant to the Un-believers a way to triumph over the Believers (sura 4:141)." However, it should be noted that all supporters of Political Islam does not support these ideas, but in contrast, argue that non-Muslims should have the right to be politically active (Scott 2010:10). Nevertheless, the idea that non-Muslims should not be in power positions in society remains in the political culture of Egypt, and is often used to discredit Coptic political candidates. For example, when Coptic politician Munir Fakhrī 'Abd al-Nūr ran for office in 1995 and 2000, his opponent distributed flyers with Qur'anic verses as arguments against a Christian as a political candidate (ibid.108). In conclusion, the Copts are underrepresented in the parliament because of an implicit discriminatory policy based on religious beliefs. Therefore, the Copts generally feel that they are being excluded from political participation rather than choosing not to participate.

In my interviews, it became clear that many Copts felt that the government cared more about maintaining its own power than protecting its people. This neglect showed itself partly in the government's perceived unwillingness to hinder sectarian strife and persecute perpetrators of sectarian violence, and partly in occasionally manipulating sectarian elements when it suited their interests. They feel that the government denies that the Copts are being persecuted within Egypt, and therefore, does not deal with the problem. For example one informant said:

The current government has a strong relationship to Islam, but the way that they explain this relationship is more wise. Sadat was very aggressive and incarcerated bishops, and the Pope. He wanted to make sharia law the only law. The current government prefers their own goods before the goods of Islam. They play with Islamism when it suits them and secular ideas when that fits their purpose. I believe as many Christian believe that the government is behind violence between Christians and Muslims on regular occasions to distract from their own incompetence, sometimes by encouraging violence, sometimes by not addressing violent attacks.

It should be noted, however, that the government has a program against extremism. After several bloody attacks on tourists and government officials, Mubarak's regime initiated a series of clampdowns against extremist elements in society. Nevertheless, the Copts view this initiative with distrust since similar attacks on them has been ignored (Zeidan 1999:57). This distrust is further strengthened since the government has done little to change the discriminatory policies against them within the state institutions. Conclusively, there is distrust within the Coptic community against the sincerity of the Egyptian state to protect the Christians. This distrust is another factor contributing too many Copts unwillingness to turn to politics for help in resisting what they perceive as an oppressive social system.

### ***6.1.2 The Juridical System***

In Egypt principles of sharia law is the main source of legislation (U.S. Department of State 2010). It should be noted though that these are principles of the law, and Egypt's legislation is, therefore, not comparable to for example Iran's sharia law. Nevertheless, the legislation of Egypt is based on religious principles, and therefore it is reasonable to regard Egypt as an Islamic state (Scott 2010:59). The majority of Egyptians support the influence of sharia law (ibid.6). My informants from the Coptic community, however, were against sharia, since they feel that Islamic law is biased towards favoring Muslim interests.

Family law is a complex part of the Egyptian law, since the different religions have the right to separate courts. The state recognizes "three heavenly religions:" Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (U.S. Department of State 2010). When there are inter sectarian disputes, which also apply to different branches of Christianity, it falls under sharia law (Scott 2010:86). One consequence of this is that the law does not recognize the marriage between a Muslim woman and a Christian man, because Muslims should not subordinate themselves to a non-Muslim (ibid.23). Another consequence is that a Christian child of a parent that converts to Islam automatically is considered Muslim. If only one of the parents converts custody of the child is generally given to the Muslim parent (ibid.87). When the child disputes this forced conversion in the courts his or her religious identity as Christian is not acknowledged (U.S. Department of State 2010). One informant told me a story about a woman he knew. Her father had converted when she was a teenager so she was legally considered Muslim. This woman is now middle aged, and has never viewed herself as Muslim but the state refuses to provide her with papers supporting her religious identity. Conclusively, when viewing the jurisprudence of inter religious disputes there seems to be a bias within the law of favoring Muslims.

These religious qualities of the law also extend beyond sharia. For example, an Ottoman decree from 1856 which places restrictions on building churches is still partly in effect. According to this decree, in order to be allowed to build a church one needed the signed permission by the sultan, later being the president himself. This law was changed in 2005, but human rights groups report that local officials refused to permit churches to be built without a supporting document that is practically impossible to obtain; this document is a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that has been established during the monarchic era (U.S. Department of State 2010). One informant commented:

It [the state] takes the shape of the civil state. They say it is civil, it is the secular, but the core is very religious. It takes form in the constitutions itself, the main source of the law. Normally building a church should go to the civil city council, but suddenly we have to go to state security. We have to have permission from the president himself, even if we are repairing a toilet.

Another religious quality of the law is that the juridical system does not acknowledge conversions from Islam to Christianity. There are no statutory prohibitions against conversion, but since local officials refuse to recognize these conversions legally it constitutes a prohibition in practice (U.S. Department of State 2010). In addition, Christians are publicly encouraged to convert to Islam, a practice that many Christians find insulting (Zeidan 1999:58).

One serious problem with the juridical system and the part it plays in the religious conflict is the unwillingness to sentence perpetrators of sectarian violence (U.S. Department of State 2010). For example, in 2000 a dispute between a Coptic merchant and a Muslim client escalated into sectarian violence. Twenty Copts and one Muslim died. The Coptic community was outraged when the court did not find any of the ninety-six defendants guilty of murder. A rage that was only partly settled when in 2003 two defendants were finally found guilty (Scott 2010:74). This unwillingness to punish perpetrators of violence against Copts creates a culture of impunity (U.S. Department of State 2010). Conclusively, the juridical system contributes to the Christians status as second-class citizens. Furthermore, the court's tendency to favor Muslims naturally causes a low confidence level among the Copts for the juridical system and their willingness to turn to the justice system for support in inter-religious conflicts.

### ***6.1.3 The Security Apparatus***

In my research many Copts claimed that they are being discriminated by the security apparatus, which they perceive as an Islamic institution. The security apparatus is in principle an extension of the government but can be discussed as an independent category, because in contrast to the

government, they mobilize quickly when conflicts appears (Casper 2010:8). Furthermore, the police and military become a target for frustration since they are the visible manifestation of the state in people's everyday life. The Copts feel that they are underrepresented in both the police force and military. To the extent to which this is true from a scholarly point of view is hard to say, since the exact percentage the Copts make up of the population is unknown. However, the admissions for Christians to the police and military academies are restricted (Zeidan 199:58). In addition, in the higher ranks within the security apparatus there are hardly any Copts (Scott 2010:83). Therefore, they regard it as an Islamic institution. One informant said:

Most of them [the police and military] are Muslims and that is discrimination in itself. They do not choose Christians to an extent which would fairly represent them. A lot of the government is corrupt and discriminating, and therefore, the police act in that way. No Christians expect the police to help them.

One of the reasons why Christians feel that they are being discriminated by the security forces, is the police conduct when handling illegal churches. One priest I spoke to whom had founded an illegal church claimed that the police was harassing him by regularly calling him into the police station to answer random questions. The same man also told a story of how a police officer had made phone calls to several Muslim men in the village encouraging them to riot against the illegal church. However, the riot never occurred and one of the Muslim men whom were a friend of the priest had called him to inform him of what the police officer had done. Clear cases of the security forces persecuting Christians have been documented by the International Religious Freedom Report which claims that the Police have repeatedly surveyed and harassed suspected converts from Islam to Christianity (U.S. Department of State 2010).

The Copts feel that the security apparatus neglects the conflict. The Copts have many stories of the police either appearing unreasonably late at scenes of conflict, or standing by at the scene of a conflict without intervening. One informant claimed:

What I saw before about many events that happen in Egypt, the police every time came late. Only to say that "we are here," but they came late, very, very late. Like what happened in Naga Hammedi [sectarian violence initiated by extremist whom killed six Copts after their Christmas Mass in 2010]. They came after all the houses were burned. The phone wires were cut, so that they can say "we did not know." But the imam announced before in the Mosque that "we will attack the Christian people." So they must have known.

Similar stories were spread after the terrorist attack in Alexandria where according to Coptic sources the soldiers whom were assigned to guard the church left their post shortly before the

explosion. If they had not they had been in the blast range of the explosion. Regardless if this is what actually happened these stories show that many Copts have a very low confidence level in the security apparatus. Two of my informants, independently from each other, said as we were walking by the soldiers guarding the church, "these are the same people whom are trying to kill us." This of course creates a feeling of insecurity within the Coptic community. Conclusively, the Copts do not perceive the presence of state security apparatus as a solution to their problem, but in contrast a part of it. The low confidence level in the security apparatus further strengthens the problem with the government's perceived unwillingness and inability to protect them from extremist elements within society.

## **6.2 Views on Muslims**

Many Copts have a dualistic view on the Muslim population, and identify two different kinds of Islam: a more moderate version and an aggressive version of Islam. Furthermore, many feel that the majority apprehends to the more aggressive version. In "both versions of Islam" there seems to be dissociation between being Muslim and committing acts of kindness. The perceived aggression from the Muslim majority is the main reason why Copts have withdrawn from the social spheres of society. From a scholarly point of view, it might be useful to separate the view on Islam and Muslims, but the Copts generally do not separate these as categories. Therefore, I will present these two opposite views.

### **6.2.1 Moderate Islam**

Most of the Christians I have spoken to do not feel that all Muslims are hostile towards them. However, there is a perception among many Christians that Muslims who treat them well are far from their religion. One informant said: "The really Muslim people who are very close to his faith and is dealing with the verse of the Qur'an, he will treat you bad. If he is far away from his faith he will treat you good." "To be "far away from Islam" can mean that the person has a more secular life style. However, often when a Muslim is described as being far from his or her religion the person is often perceived as being closer to Christianity. An additional example can be seen in one informant's answer to the question of whether she felt that all Muslims treated her badly or if it were some Muslims: "Most of them not good. In the school we have Muslims, but they have Christian behaviors." When I asked this woman to clarify what she meant by "Christian behavior," she replied, "We must look to the God all the time. If anyone wants help we give him help." Hence, there is a dissociation between being Muslim and committing acts of kindness. There is a dualistic perception where Islam is deeply associated with unmoral behavior and Christianity with moral

righteousness. In conclusion, most Christians feel that not all Muslim individuals are aggressive towards Christians; however, they still strongly associate Islam with hostility.

### ***6.2.2 Aggressive Islam***

The majority of the Christians I have spoken to feel that the major factor contributing to the escalation of the conflict is the rise of an aggressive interpretation of Islam in Egypt. They perceive that most Muslims treat them with hostility. Many Copts claim that there has been a development during the last four or five decades where society has become increasingly geared towards a conservative interpretation of Islam. Some of my more educated informants also pointed out that this was due to a development where Egyptians went to work in the Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, which lacks religious pluralism and has more extreme interpretations of Islam. These workers then brought these conservative ideas of Islam back with them to Egypt. Sameh Fawzy, Coptic political writer and researcher with expertise on Muslim-Christian relationships, feels that the main problem is not religion; however, he agrees that the returning guest workers from Saudi Arabia contributed to the rise of a more conservative form of Islam. He adds that this conservative interpretation became so influential since the returning workers with their newly acquired wealth constituted the new uprising class in Egypt. He argues that the descending classes generally tend to mimic the culture of the rising classes, such as dress code, language, and social life style (Fawzy 2010). From a scholarly point of view, one can draw the conclusion that political Islam is widely supported in contemporary Egypt (Scott 2010:6). However, is not a matter of moderate and extreme Islam we are rather speaking of a spectrum, and neither is it a matter of which interpretation is the “true Islam,” they are different forms of Islam. As political Islam has become more popular, it has also become more diversified (ibid.4). For example, the Muslim Brotherhood, although the organization has a history of extremism and still have members whom support these ideas the majority of the followers are liberal (ibid.53). Nevertheless, during the second half of the century the Copts faced more personal and collective discrimination. In addition, the violence against them increased (U.S. Department of State 2010). This indicates the growth of more hostile ideas as well.

Most of my informants felt that the conflict mostly affects them personally in the form of discrimination in everyday situations. They feel that often when the discrimination happens it is not explicitly said to be because of religion, but that it is disguised. Many feel that they are being discriminated in public transportation. Tuk-tuk, taxi, and bus drivers will not stop for them. Other stories I have heard of this disguised discrimination is that vendors will refuse to sell their merchandise to Christians without explicitly naming this as the reason, but simply telling them to leave. There are also several forms of discrimination against Christians within the education system,

which many of my younger informants perceived as a serious problem. For example, the universities accept a lower percentage of Christians than they are believed to make up of the population. Therefore, Muslims with lower grades are favored over their Christian competition (Zeidan 1999:58). Another form of this every day discrimination that the Copts frequently speak of is discrimination on the labor market, which is perceived as a quite serious matter since the unemployment level is high. One informant stated: "When you are searching for a new job. If you know someone they can solve it under the table, but if you do not you probably will not get it. It is not easy for a Christian to find a job." The Copts claim that they have a more difficult time being hired for government jobs. This is a claim which is also supported by the International Report on Religious Freedom which critiques the government on this point, since the conduct of the government has a modeling effect on society and therefore causes further entrenchment between the religious groups (U.S. Department of State 2010). One Coptic woman told me about when she had an appointment to meet with the head of the faculty in which she worked. When she showed up to the meeting without wearing a veil she was asked to leave immediately.

The veil is a reason why many Christian women face difficulties, since it is a visible manifestation of their faith. Because many Christian women do not wear veils and have more westernized clothes, they suffer sexual discrimination in public places. They get sexual comments yelled after them, stones thrown at them, or demeaning religious comments such as calling them unbelievers or saying that they will go to hell. One informant told the following story:

I was at a funeral with a girl whose father died. It was around the time when school was finished so we met some primary school boys that started throwing stones. We said to them: "stop!" Then a Muslim woman came by and said "it is because of what you are wearing." I mean we came from a funeral; we did not wear anything very tight or so.

The sexual and religious harassment causes many Christian women avoid public places, especially if they are alone or if it is late. Instead of walking, they take tuk-tuks or other public transportation.

Another form of religious hostility that Christians face on a regular basis is hostile preaching by certain Muslim preachers, *imams*, during the Friday prayers. The Muslim Friday prayers are announced to the city from the speakers of the minarets is a very powerful public religious statement. In the city where I was, my informants claimed that there were a couple of imams who repeatedly gave aggressive preaching against Christians. They told me that it was common to have demeaning preaching about the Christian dogma, which is accused of being a polytheistic religion,

or insulting comments about Christian saints, or Jesus. The sermons sometimes referred to the Christians with demeaning names such as the following; “dogs,” which are considered very unclean animals in Arabic culture; unbelievers, or “*kafir*,” which is a demeaning term since a person without faith is considered a bad person in Middle Eastern culture; and “unclean,” contrasting that term with the Islamic pursuit of cleanliness and purity. Other times, the messages were very aggressive, threatening to kill Christians, their Pope, and bishops.

There is also of perception of Islam as being diabolical. The Copts claim that some of the Qur'anic verses are against Christians. There are some verses in the Qur'an that speaks of the relationship between Christians and Muslims. One of the most controversial ones is: “Oh ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors; they are but friends and protectors to each other because they are the enemies of Islam and its people (sura 5:51).” The more radical interpretations of this verse are that Muslims should not have social relationships with non-Muslims. Interpretations that are more moderate claim that the sura only refers to Jews and Christians, who oppose Islam and threaten the Islamic community (Scott 2010:137). Regardless of the possible interpretations of the Qur'an, since verses like this one has been used by spokesmen of aggressive interpretations of Islam the Qur'anic verses is perceived as very threatening by many Copts. One of my informants whom works with peace building among the Copts, claimed that many Copts feel that Muhammad was inspired by the devil when he wrote the Qur'anic verses; hence, everything Islamic is demonic to them. Furthermore, the main reason why Islam is perceived as diabolical is the violent methods of the Jihad movement. One informant said the following: "The act of killing itself is accompanied with verses from the Qur'an. As if they are presenting a sacrifice for their God. Human beings become a sacrifice for their God." Another informant I spoke to felt that a God that speaks of killing is not a true God. She perceived that these violent preaching are the words of Satan. I also met a group of young girls whom had written a song, in which the lyric spoke of terrorists as devils whom had given the Christians "the evil eye," and how they had to drive out this evil. In a world image where one believes in God and the Devil as the ultimate forces of good and evil, it is a quite logical conclusion to draw that something that is perceived as threatening to one's life and religion is evil. This perception also has implications for how the conflict is perceived, because the conflict is not only about social factors such as fair political representation but it is also perceived as a conflict between ultimate truths. In conclusion, the Copts experience an intolerant discriminating attitude from the majority of the Muslim population. Because these intolerant attitudes sometimes take on extreme and violent forms, this discrimination is perceived as very threatening. Due to the strong belief in ultimate spiritual forces of good and evil, this threat is often interpreted in religious terms. As I clarified in part five, the Copts claim that this perceived threat

from the Muslim community is the main reason for the Copts' social withdraw from society.

### **6.3 The Disintegration of the Coptic Community**

The Copts perceive two main problems in the conflict: firstly, is that they are being treated with hostility due to aggressive interpretations of Islam; the second is internal decline and fragmentation. The Coptic community is in crisis due to the demographic decline. The Arab West foundation, an organization that is active in monitoring Coptic Muslim relations, estimates that the percentage of Copts is lower than what is generally assumed. The claim that due to frequent conversions, lower birthrates, and large scale migration the Copt now make up as little as 5 or 6 percent of the population (Scott 2010:8). In particular, the problems with conversions and migration have caused a form of anxiety over the future existence of the Coptic community in Egypt. Therefore, I will describe the Copts' view on these two phenomena.

In Egypt, conversions are a very sensitive issue and a source of much sectarian violence. This is largely due to Egypt's culture of honor. For example, Egypt's Copts have for some time met a lot of rage from fundamentalist groups in the Middle East over a controversy of conversion. A controversy that has been responded to with terror attacks against churches in Iraq and Egypt. One version of the story is that the wives of two priests left their family and converted to Islam, and then where forcibly brought back by the Coptic Church and are held against their will within a monastery. The other version of the story is that these women were deceived or forced to convert to Islam and then voluntarily returned to the Coptic community. This becomes such a sensitive topic, because the issue is larger than the personal religious preferences of these women. Due to the culture of honor, their conversion brings shame to their family, the kin, and the Church. The collective shame is aggravated by the fact that these where the wives of priests. Conversely, the aggression with which this was met reflects and issue larger than the issue with these women: it is about Islam itself.

It is very clear when talking to the Copts about these issues that conversions are a very sensitive topic. The Copts tell many stories of conversion. The stories often include elements of deception, violence, or sexually predatory Muslims. For example, I heard a story about a teenage girl who was invited home by her Muslim classmate. However, when the girls walked in the door, the Muslim girl's brothers were there and threatened to rape the Christian girl. Rape has severe social consequences since a woman is expected to be a virgin at marriage. Consequently, a raped woman can be left with the choice of remaining unmarried, and therefore, without a social status, or potentially marry her rapist. In this case, marrying her rapist would also include converting. The girl

then asked if she could just clean herself in the bathroom quickly, which her captives agreed that she could do. She then walked into the bathroom and took her own life by throwing herself through the bathroom window. Suicide is generally not condoned within Christianity, but in this particular story, the girl is considered a martyr because she was willing to die rather than defile her honor. Some of these stories might be true since forced conversion have been documented by the International Report on Religious Freedom (Scott 2010:76). The main point of telling these stories is not to evaluate the truth content of them since it is an impossible task. Rather, I see them a symptom of anxiety caused by a perceived threat to one's community. Converts are problematic in all social constellations because it questions the legitimacy of the group. Portraying the conversions as often being forced deals with the problem of the convert. Many Copts, however, voluntarily convert, often because of reasons that are not primarily religious. It can be a way to be granted a divorce, since Muslim family law in contrast to the Christian allows divorces (Scott 2010:1). Furthermore, it is the easiest way for a girl to escape her family (ibid.77). Social and economic pressure also contributes to the high conversion rate (ibid.1). Conclusively, conversions are a problem for the Coptic community. The forced dimension of these stories are partly a way to deal with that members of their community makes strategic choices about something as deep as religion, which is the very fundament of their community's solidarity.

Another important reason for the decrease of the Coptic population is migration. People leave because of the high unemployment level in Egypt and to escape persecution (Meinardus 2006:49). The problem of unemployment is further exacerbated for the Christians because they experience that they are discriminated in the labor market. One of my informants claimed that the employer discrimination can be as blunt as to advertise in print that they only are seeking Muslim applicants. The mass emigration among the Copts started somewhere during the reign of Sadat. The will to leave Egypt is a noticeable phenomenon, in particular among young people. However, they speak about lacking opportunities in Egypt rather than a longing for the other country. One type of migration is that many Copts have moved to the United States, Canada, and Europe (Meinardus 2006:49). The other type is that many Coptic men go to the Persian Gulf countries to work. These men generally do not intend to settle there but see it a step on the way toward earning enough money to migrate to the West. One informant claimed, "Most of the people that work in Kuwait, try to go from Kuwait to America. They take it as a step, and then they go out. It is breaking lots of family ties, and friendship. Migration in general is not an easy step, but it is happening due to deeper strong pressure." These two types of migration weaken the Coptic community within Egypt in different ways. One informant commented the migration to the West:

It affects us in two ways. The first way is that the percentage [of the Copts within the population] is falling down. Number and percentage has to be reasonable because the Coptic Christian community is the largest Christian community in the Middle East. To have this silent exodus changes the ratio. It changes the demography. The second effect it has created is that many of the good ones—the educated with money—are the ones that are ready to leave. You take the cream of society and take them away. What is left is the poorer less educated, which are an easier target and they are easily pushed down. It becomes a serious matter. Many people want to leave; it is a continuous pressure for a few decades.

It is difficult to obtain visas for residency in Europe and North America and those who are eligible for citizenship are generally the elite of the Coptic community. The migration to the Gulf also weakens the Coptic community. The men who work in the Gulf are only able to return home a few weeks a year; however, their families stay in Egypt. It has been argued that the absence of men would cause an emancipation of women (Khafagy 1984:19). In contrast, I would argue that it has created a situation where many “single” mothers are left alone to deal with a highly patriarchal society. They are to some extent disempowered by the absence of their husband. Women speak about the trauma of their family being leaderless, of their children crying when their father comes home because he is a stranger to them, and the feeling of being left alone with the burden of raising a family. The migration is such a large phenomenon that several people expressed the fear that eventually there will be no Christians left in Egypt. Some people even expressed the opinion that the government neglects the situation of the Copts in a conscious strategy to make all the Christians leave through a mass exodus. The migration is breaking the traditional bonds of the community. The economic kinship ties are still intact, but there is an emotional and sociopolitical crisis occurring, which further weakens the Coptic community’s ability to resist through conventional sociopolitical means. To illustrate this one informant responded to what he felt needed to happen for the situation to become better for the Coptic community.

Any guy my age go to the Gulf, Europe or America. Then he comes back a few weeks for his visa, and then works a year in Europe. He is not working for his country. He creates nothing here, no heritage. In know these are strange words. I think we need more stabile projects. If they would stay here we could form stronger groups. All the statistic of Christians is not true. Between a hundred guys they say there are seven Christians. This gives them a political power and they can tell us what to do. People would be better organized if they stayed here.

The disintegration of the Coptic community is perceived as a severe problem. In a society where kinship lines are fundamental and the social organization is based on a religious classification, this demographic decline further weakens the Copts’ ability to resist through conventional social and

political forums.

#### **6.4 Conclusions**

The Copts see themselves as discriminated by the state, which they feel favors Muslims. They see the state as an Islamic institution, and that this religious bias transfers to the practice of important state branches. They claim that the government was mostly interested in holding on to its own power, but manipulated Islamic interest when it suited their interests. Furthermore, they view the security forces with much suspicion because they doubt their sincerity in protecting the Copts. The juridical system is also viewed as having an Islamic bias, since the main source of legislation is principles of sharia law. In addition, they feel that this religious bias also transfers to the education system and government jobs. From a scholarly point of view there seems to be a problem with the Egyptians state's treatment of religious minorities. There seems to be a religious reasoning influencing important branches of state which derives from an intellectual tradition within political Islam. These factors all contribute to the Copts' political withdrawal from society, and inability to use conventional political and juridical power spheres to resist a perceived oppression.

The Copts also see the majority of the Muslim population as having hostile ideas towards them. A problem they feel is getting worse. Most Copts would agree that all Muslims do not treat them with hostility, but they still strongly associate Islam with aggressive ideas towards them. They feel that there exist ideas fundamental to Islam that are against Christians. For many Copts this perceived threat from Islam also takes on religious dimension, since they perceive parts of Islam and in particular the Jihad Movement as diabolic. From a scholarly point of view, one can say that political Islam has gained a stronger support in Egypt. How many of the followers that have hostile ideas against Christians are hard to say. Nevertheless, since the second half of the century there has been increased violence and a hardening social climate for Christians, which unfortunately seems to indicate the growth of more hostile ideas as well. This perceived threat is the major reason for the Copts' choice to withdraw from the social sphere, causing the social segregation of the Coptic community. This perceived threat also contributes to why the Copts rarely resist in direct confrontational ways, because they fear violent retribution from extremist elements within the society.

The final problem they identify is internal fragmentation. The traditional kinship structures that tie together the Coptic community are being weakened through migrations and conversions. This leaves the Coptic community in a state of crisis, and weakens their ability to resist through sociopolitical means.

## **7.0 RELIGIOUS FORMS OF RESISTANCE**

In this section, I answer the question of what paths the resistance of the Coptic community has taken instead of conventional social and political spheres. I argue that the Copts' religious revival has central elements to it that can be seen as a spiritual opposition movement against hostile ideas against them. The Church of course has many other spiritual agendas, but this religious resistance is an important aspect. What separates this movement from an ordinary religious movement is the strong emphasis on symbols and myths that communicates resistance. Furthermore, the existence and nature of the movement is highly influenced by a cosmological perception that in times of hardship it is beneficial for the individual to devote oneself to God. Therefore, I first illustrate that there is a religious revival among the Copts and the importance of the historical context in which it arose. Later on, I argue that because of a desire to attain closeness to God, the Coptic community has gathered around religious leaders. Then I examine the symbols and myths around which the Coptic community has formed solidarity in this movement. These symbols and myths are important because they are the means by which the Copts communicate their resistance against ideas of Islamic superiority. The symbols and myths are: firstly, a historic identity which makes primordial claims to the land on behalf of the Christians, and therefore, resists the idea of Egypt as an Islamic country; secondly, the neo-martyr a symbol which turns the defeated in this life to the victor in the next, and resist the idea of the perpetrator as the winner; and finally, the belief the belief that God intervenes on their behalf in the conflict, and therefore this belief resists ideas of what religion constitutes the ultimate truth.

### **7.1 Increased Devotion to Religious Life**

In order to argue that the religious revival of the Copts can be seen as a form of religious resistance movement, I first have to illustrate that there has been a religious revival, and furthermore, the importance of the historical context in which this revival arose. Since Nassir's revolution in 1952, there has been a pattern of increased religiosity among the Coptic Christians (Scott 2010:66). A member of the clergy claimed that although Christianity in Egypt is being weakened by the decrease in the number of Christians, it is growing stronger in the level of devotion the Christians show in their faith. For example, many young people were more interested in learning about their religion. This Christian revival can also be seen in the monasteries where there has been an increased interest among both men and women to devote their life to god. Priests, nuns and monks that I spoke to all confirmed the fact that more and more people chose this path in life. Professor Meinardus, the foremost scholar within Coptology, comments this increased devotion to religious life: "The unprecedented revival of the Coptic Church during the second half of the

century is one of the great historical events in the world of Christianity (Meinardus1999: 3)."

One major contributing factor to the revival of the Coptic Church is the Sunday School Movement. The first Sunday School's was founded in Egypt was founded as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, in 50's it started to become an influential movement (Scott 2010:67). Around this time, many young educated men joined the movement, whom were frustrated with the religious discrimination they faced in society. Many of them joined monasteries in order to be accepted as leaders within the Coptic Church. Most important of them being Nazīr Gayyid, the steward of the movement, who later would become Pope Shenouda III. These men represented something new. They where an educated elite whom were better adapted to face the power spheres of modern society than their predecessors were (Hasan 2003:61). Central ideas within this movement were Coptic patriotism and resistance against discrimination (Scott 2010:67). Besides the movement's strong political undertones, it also had another important goal: to restore the Coptic Church to its former glory (Hasan 2003:4). This is also the reason they were so successful in gathering a scattered Coptic community. They managed to form solidarity around symbols and myths that are emotionally potent with Coptic Christianity such as "pious suffering" and martyrdom (ibid. 2003:1).

It is not a coincidence that this Coptic revival happened at this particular time: their revival has paralleled an Islamic revival in the Middle East that started in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scott 2010:66). As a consequence, the conditions for the Copts steadily deteriorated during this time. In particular, since Egypt more and more entered the intellectual Islamic orbit (Hasan 2003:3). The Copts themselves speak of increasingly hostile attitudes against them, and most of them also feel that the hostility is getting worse. One could interpret these two phenomena as simply being correlated; however, when examining the nature of the religious symbols around which the Coptic community has formed solidarity it becomes clear that it is more than simply a desire to live a more spiritual life. It is a way to resist hostile elements within in their society.

## **7.2 Increased Devotion to Religious Leaders**

I argue that the reason why the Coptic community has gathered around religious leaders in particular is because the Coptic Church is believed to be the manifestation of God's will on earth. Since the 1950's, the Copts have withdrawn from the political scene (Scott 2010:66). During the last decades, the Coptic community has been politically represented by the clergy, headed by Pope Shenouda. The Pope sees himself as the spokesperson for millions of Copts (ibid.69). In addition to Pope Shenouda's political involvement, there have also been cases where the clergy have encouraged or discouraged their followers to vote for a particular candidate (ibid.69). The Coptic clergy has been frequently criticized for leading their people politically (ibid.70). It is important to

note though that the Church has no explicit political agenda, other than that the Christians should be fully acknowledged citizens with equal rights as Muslims (Fawzy 2010).

When I asked the Copts who represents them politically, many answered “Pope Shenouda.” For example, informant responded the following to the question if the Copts had anyone who represented them politically:

Sometimes Pope Shenouda speaks for us, sometimes the businessmen people. But we follow Pope Shenouda. Sometimes bishops, and sometimes priest speak for us. Many priest speak about our problems to newspapers, but they still wait for Pope Shenouda. Every time something has happened he has wisdom. So they wait for his words to see what he has to say.

Some informants also felt that the Pope was forced into this position because there were no secular candidates to take his place, due to the political discrimination against the Copts. I believe that that is certainly one aspect of the issue. Nevertheless, I would argue that the other key aspect to why the Copts have chosen to gather around the clergy in particular, rather than organize any other forms of social movements, is because they believe them to better understand the will of God. Within Coptic Christianity, the Church is seen as the earthly manifestation of God’s will (Meinardus 2006:23). This is also evident in the holy charisma the Copts ascribe to their Fathers. For example, the majority of Coptic homes have pictures of respected Bishops or Popes on the walls. They are often portrayed with other religious motifs such as saints or pictures of Christ. The holy charisma ascribed to their Fathers is mostly evident in the Copts’ love for their Pope. His portrait is on numerous items of religious curiosities. For anyone who visits his Wednesday sermons in Cairo the level of devotion he is given is evident. I asked one of my informants why these men are considered holy. She explained to me that it is not necessarily their title as priest or bishop that makes them holy. Rather, it is the time they devote to bible studies and in communication with God that fills them with the Holy Spirit. The idea that the clergy have a deeper understanding of Gods will is central in order to understand the Copts’ high level of devotion to their clergy. It is also central in understanding the political role the clergy has had during the last decades.

### **7.3 Importance of a Religious Historic Identity**

I argue that the Copts emphasize a historic identity as a means of making primordial claims to the land on behalf of their religious group. This historical narration must be seen as a resistance against the idea of Egypt as a Muslim country. However, this does not mean that the Copts’ historical identity is altogether constructed. It rather means that all narrations of history is to some extent constructed, since we do not remember history, we interpret it (Botros 2006:177). In this

interpretation, people tend to use historical frames to explain and justify a social reality (ibid.174). The devotion to historical myths gives the believers a cohesive past and unites their identities (Castelli 2004:30). In the case of the Copts, two identities are prominent in their view on their historical identity. Firstly, they see themselves as protectors of an ancient Church. Secondly, they see themselves as heirs of the pharaohs. In addition, these two identities are both connected.

The identity as "protectors of an ancient Church" gives their own suffering an explanation and a historical context. The strong attachment to this identity turns their suffering into a form of resistance in a spiritual battle. The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the oldest Christian Churches. It has undeniably had a very bloody history with many who was killed because of their faith (Meinardus 2006:33). It is believed to have been founded by the apostle Mark in 64 AD (Henderson 2005:155). The Copts take a lot of pride in that their Church was founded by an apostle of Christ. St. Mark was eventually executed because of his preaching and died the death of a martyr (Meinardus 2006:33). St. Mark is considered to be the first patriarch in a descending line to the current Pope Shenouda whom is the 117th patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church (ibid.140). The heritage of martyrdom and suffering is very important to the Copts. The Church has since its founding been persecuted in periods of time. Therefore, they see the great number of martyrs within their Church as evidence of the Copts' devotion to Christ (Meinardus 1999:1). This is a heritage that the Copts repeatedly emphasize and are very proud of. One of my informants stated: "the blood of the martyrs are the seeds of the Church." This means that their Church still exists because their ancestors suffered for Christ and defended Christianity with their lives. The identification and glorification of their people's historic suffering gives meaning to their own suffering.

Within Christianity, the one who suffers for Christ will receive salvation in the afterlife (Castelli 2004: 85). The principle of reciprocity governs all social relationships. Furthermore, the nature of what one gives also determines what one will receive (Leach 1976:5). The Copts are in a reciprocal social relationship with God, where they believe that their suffering for Christ will be reciprocated in the afterlife. Consequently, although it might appear as though they are taking the role as the passive victim, they are in contrast, taking a role which makes them the winners in the afterlife. This identity is something that the Copts take very seriously, and actively chooses. For example, there is a tradition within Coptic Christianity to tattoo a Coptic cross to the inside of one's wrist. The symbol of the cross of course represents their faith. Religious rituals that include bodily mutilations such as tattoos generally represent permanent stages in life (Leach 1971:66). Therefore, this tradition communicates that they will be faithful to their God throughout life. Furthermore, the exposed positioning of this tattoo communicates a resistance to these perceived external pressures to convert or in other ways abandon one's faith.

The Copts consider Egypt to be their holy land. Of course, Jerusalem and Bethlehem are also their holy land but the Copts have a strong connection to the land of Egypt. There is an oral tradition within Coptic Christianity narrating the journey of the holy family in Egypt (Meinardus 1999:16). There are numerous sights where it is foretold that the young Jesus during his flight from Herod made miracles happen. The Copts are very proud of this history and many pilgrims visit these sights (ibid.24). Therefore, the Copts see Egypt as a very special place for Christianity, since it is holy land which Jesus himself has blessed. Due to this history, their identity as protectors of Christianity in Egypt becomes much more important to them.

There is a popular perception among the Copts that they are the true Egyptians, the heirs of the pharaohs. They believe that the roots of Christianity in Egypt can be traced back to the pharaonic era. Because the culture requires that one marries within one's religion and Christianity was the dominant religion at the time of the Arab invasion, they consider themselves to be the heirs of those who did not convert to Islam. Therefore, they consider themselves to be the true owners of the land. They feel that since the invasion their culture has been under strong pressure to adapt to the Arab culture. To counteract this process, there has been a movement where the Copts have revived identity markers of the pharaonic heritage. The most interesting identity markers in this context are the ones used to illustrate a similarity between Coptic Christianity and pharaonic religion. The emphasis on the pharaonic identity can be seen within modern Coptic icon painting where there is a trend to include ancient Egyptian religious motifs in their art. For example, there is one icon painting where the flight of the holy family is portrayed with the symbol of the god Horus (Meinardus 2002:23). The reason for this is that the Copts feel that there are many similarities between Christianity and the religion of the pharaohs. One of the pharaonic myths that are ascribed these Christians qualities is the myth of Osiris, Isis and Horus which is seen as a primitive version of the trinity. The father Osiris was a just god who ruled well with his wife Isis by his side. However, he was deceived by his brother Set who killed him and dismembered his body. Isis, overcome by grief managed to find all the scattered parts of her husband body and, with the help of the gods managed to bring him back to life long enough to become pregnant with his child Horus. Horus would later come to kill the evil force personified by Seth, and rule Egypt with righteousness (Kamil 2002:16). One of my informants pointed out the similarity with Christianity; the spirit of the father lives in the son who defeats evil and saves humankind. Another important symbolic similarity in this story is between Isis and Virgin Mary and their respective divine offspring (Kamil 2002:16). Traditions that originally celebrated Isis have survived into contemporary times and now celebrate the Virgin Mary (ibid.18). Another example is the revival of the Ankh cross, which is popularized on t-shirts, necklaces, and other religious curiosities. The idea that the cross is a symbol for Jesus

victory over death is originally an Egyptian idea. The pharaonic gods handed this life-bestowing symbol over to the pharaoh whom then became the incarnation of God on earth, and therefore, transcended death. The Christians then transferred ankh's symbolism of eternal life onto the crucifix. The emphasis on this ethno-religious heritage has gained increased importance through the influence of the Sunday School Movement (Scott 2010:67). What is interesting about this revived emphasis on the pharaonic heritage is that it makes primordial claims not only between the Coptic people and the land, but between Christianity and the land. Furthermore, this idea is also linked to the idea of them as protectors of Christianity in Egypt. Because the reason often given by the Copts themselves to why Christianity still exists in Egypt in spite of the history of persecution is because of these similarities in the pharaonic and Christian faith. One informant said:

Many North African countries were all Christian, but they all turned to Islam but Egypt. Christians there did not have very strong roots. Egyptians are the first that believed in eternity, as is evident in the pyramids. They were also the first to believe in judgment after death, and the existence of one god.

This could be seen as a resistance against the idea of Egypt as an Islamic country. One informant claimed: "The Muslims think this country is for them, not for us, and that we came after them. But when you look to history all Egypt was Christian." Therefore, this emphasis on the pharaonic aspects of Coptic culture could be seen as a tool used to make primordial claims to the land. In addition, since the Middle East has strong tradition of connecting citizenship with religion, and Egypt has this religious social organization discussed in section five, these primordial claims are not only for them as an ethnic group but as a religious community. In this historical narration, they are the true owners of the land, and Christianity the true religion. This is also related to their identity as protectors of an ancient Church Christianity in Egypt, since many Christians perceive themselves to be the victims of a long-term unjust persecution by the invading Muslims.

#### **7.4 Importance of Neo-Martyrs**

In order to understand the act of martyrdom one must see the martyrs as the believer sees them. Then one will see that it is actually a form of resistance. I have already discussed the importance of suffering and martyrdom for the Coptic historic identity. However, the Copts' idea of martyrdom extends well beyond reconciling a social reality with a violent past. Therefore, I find it necessary to bring up neo-martyrdom as a separate category since the idea of martyrdom is still considered a contemporary social reality among the Copts and have a considerable emotional potency.

Martyrdom is partly a reciprocal social contract between the martyr and God. Within all forms of Christianity, the act of martyrdom is central, since Christianity was founded by an act of

martyrdom. Jesus sacrifice on the cross conquered death for man and enabled eternal life for his followers. Therefore, the crucifixion is the most central myth within the Christian dogma. The Christian martyrdom is, therefore, partly an imitation of Christ (Castelli 2004: 82). One of my informants said: "All began with the blood of Jesus, and continues with the blood of martyrs." To deny one's faith is considered sinful within Christianity (Matthew 26:69). Therefore, martyrdom is an act of witnessing. To stand by one's faith in spite of external pressure—it is the ultimate leap of faith. However, again reciprocity is key, and the belief that the ultimate sacrifice also comes with the ultimate reward. After the terror attack in Alexandria, the Church in the city where I stayed put up a large black banner in honor of the martyrs which read: "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony (Revelation 6:9)." This bible passage describes the apocalypse when Jesus, the lamb that was sacrificed for the salvation of humanity, grants the martyrs eternal life. Therefore, one of the most emotionally powerful aspects of martyrdom is that what happens to the believer in this life is rendered unimportant in comparison to the belief in eternal life in heaven (Castelli 2004:54).

Martyrdom holds an even more central role in Coptic Christianity compared to many other branches of Christianity. The reason for this is that the act of martyrdom takes control over the narrative (Castelli 2004:33). It has the ability to turn the victim into the winner and the killer into the defeated. When it comes to the Coptic martyrdom, they idealize a pacifist for of martyrdom. One informant said: "We don't ask them [the martyrs] to attack others. This is not the Coptic martyrdom, but if death comes to us, we are not afraid. We have a belief that we will be in the Kingdom of God." Because, of this idea of the noble victim, martyrdom has the double effect that it turns the martyr to a state above humanity, and the perpetrator to a state below humanity (ibid.201). One informant said: "The martyr is above the killer. I am above your gun. Your gun can kill my body but you give me a new life a stronger life." This is the paradox of martyrdom. The moment of death is both a tragedy and a moment of joy, because the martyr has begun a journey to holy purer form of existence (ibid.131). Conclusively, martyrdom turns the defeated in this life into a winner in the battle of ultimate truths.

Neo-martyrs in the Coptic Church are generally considered Christians whom in contemporary times have been killed by Muslims because of their faith (Rubensson 2008:235). This is important to understand the Copts' view on martyrdom. They do not only view their ancestors as victims of bloody religious persecution they see this as a continuous pressure and that their Church is under a constant threat of extinction (Zeidan 1999:16). One informant said: "Although the first martyr has fallen in the year of 86 AD the last might have fallen just a few hours ago." In studying neo-

martyrdom, it is evident how the historical narration of Coptic martyrdom is transferred to contemporary events. The attack that killed six young Coptic men after the Christmas mass in Naga Hammedi is an example of this. One of my informants told me a story about one of the young men who were murdered. He had the day before the attack given away all his possessions. Before he went to the church, he told his mother "This is the last day you will see me, because today I am going to my wedding." The word wedding in Coptic literary translates to crowning. Furthermore, to die for one's faith is often described as receiving the crown of martyrdom. The crown in Christianity represents the reward that will be given in the Kingdom of Heaven and is generally seen in opposition to the cross, which represents suffering. The bible reads: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12)." In the Coptic historical narrative, the martyr is usually called by Jesus or an angel to bear witness to his or her faith (Meinardus 1999:107). Hence, the important detail in this story is that the young man knew that he faced death, and still chose the path of martyrdom. Another parallel to the historical mythology of martyrdom is the idea that the commitment to one's faith in spite of suffering, and in particular in spite of death, will make Muslim's convert. In the historical myth of martyrs it is common that when the witnesses of the execution sees the martyr stand by their faith in spite of death, they are convinced of which is the true faith and converts (ibid.107). There is a tradition within Coptic Christianity to often respond to acts of violence with non-violence. It is considered a sign of spiritual strength and purity to be able to forgive one's enemy. The bible reads: "But I say to you, that ye resist not evil: but whoever shall strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matthew 5:39)." In the Pope's Christmas sermon on the Christmas mass shortly after the terrorist attack in Alexandria he said: "we will continue believing in the God that preaches love and forgiving one's enemy." An informant that was watching the sermon with me said, "You see what he did? He compared their faith to ours." Some of my informants said that they hoped that the Muslims would listen to the speeches of the Pope and the Bishop and realize that Christianity was the true path. There is an idea that this spiritual strength associated with martyrdom will show the true path for followers of Islam.

These neo-martyrs and the resistance they represent are celebrated within Coptic culture. For example, there is a music video about the event on Coptic television. The music video shows pictures from the funeral of the young men, and pictures one of the boys weeping mother. Then the lyric says: "Don't cry anymore my mother. I am with Jesus now. Why are your clothes black? You should dress in white, because I am with Jesus now." The victims of the attack in Alexandria received a similar tribute. In social media, many Copts expressed their grief by having black pictures with white crosses, or other pictures with a similar symbolism, as profile pictures on the

social community facebook.com. Most Coptic churches held memorial services, where they simultaneously mourned their departure and celebrated their martyrdom. After the service one of my informants commented that she thought everyone who went to the service left the church with the desire to become martyrs. She was not alone in this perception. After the attack, which happened shortly before the Coptic Christmas, there was a great concern that a Coptic church would be attacked again. In particular, after a video clip started to circulate online which contained instructions on how to make a bomb, and encouraging people to join the Jihad and bomb a Coptic church on Christmas Eve. Because of this threat, I asked an informant if she and her family were going to church on Christmas. She responded, "We are not scared. Everyone knows something will happen, but everyone will still go. We would be glad to sacrifice ourselves." Hence, the martyr is not a passive recipient of violence—martyrdom is an active choice. To go to the church in spite of a bomb threat is an act that strongly communicates resistance against hostile elements within society. The heavenly reward is certainly an important aspect to this; however, death in itself is meaningless unless it communicates something. It is firstly when martyrdom is put in context against the power it resists it gains meaning. The act of Martyrdom should be understood as a refusal to assimilation (Rubensson 2008:246).

Martyrs and what they represent is also celebrated in the religious practice of the Copts. The Copts believe that the martyrs are alive in heaven. They are therefore considered to be the highest members of their Church, since they are the righteous winners in a spiritual battle. One informant said:

We had the Islamic, the Ottoman, and the new era. All the time we have martyrs. They are part of our family. It is a line of honor in our family. All the time they stood strong and defended their faith. They had normal life but they had very strong situations in their life. And we can learn from them. As they suffered and won we can suffer and win. They are very inspiring to us.

Furthermore, in Middle Eastern culture there is a belief that one cannot only speak to the dead they can speak back (Meinardus 2006:12). One informant said: "I talk to St. George sometimes, and then he comes to me. I know this does not happen in Europe, but it happens in Egypt." Herein lies the power of martyrdom for the believer; it blurs the boundaries between this life and the next and connects these realities (Castelli 2004:123). In prayers, the believer, therefore, has a spiritual communication with martyrs who intercede in their prayers with God. This bond therefore strengthens the believers in their faith and in the struggle that the martyrs embody. The celebration of martyrs is thus a continuation of the resistance the martyr represents.

## 7.5 Importance of Divine Intervention

I argue that the increased religious devotion is partly a form of resistance in which the Copts ask God to support them in their cause. The Copts believe that miracles are not only a part of a historical past, but that God still aids his people through miracles. This is linked to a cosmological perception where one must show one's devotion in prayers and fasting in order to be given this heavenly reward.

The belief in the omnipotence of God is important to understand why the Copts believe that miracles are a contemporary reality. The Copts perceive biblical stories as historical events rather than purely symbolic stories. (Meinardus 2002:93). This is because the Copts have a theological view on history. This means that they discern divine will in historical processes. They believe that God directs the faith of human beings in general and their faith in particular in accordance to a cosmic plan (ibid.19). In this historical narration, miracles are common and are seen as God's victory over Satan (ibid. 93). In my research, I have discerned three types of miracles that the Copts generally discuss. Firstly, miracles intended to inspire persistence in one's faith in spite of persecution. Secondly, miracles intended to protect the Copts. Thirdly, miracles intended to punish the evildoers.

The miracles intended to inspire persistence in one's faith, are usually interpreted as that God has not abandoned them in spite of times of hardship. The Copts' history is filled with miracles like this. For example, in times of severe persecution it has been reported that icons have been sweating or bleeding (Meinardus 1999:119). For example, an icon of St. Mary was reported crying blood in 1989 (Meinardus 2002:9). These miracles have been interpreted as the saint partaking in the suffering of the Copts (Meinardus 1999:121). Sometimes these reported miracles are interpreted to have been omens of hard times to come. One informant told me that St. Mary appeared before the massacre of Christians that took place during the reign of Sadat. Simultaneously as she appeared the sky and the moon was colored blood red. The informant then explained that this was interpreted as an omen of coming hardships. Many informants also told me stories about other miracles involving St. Mary, the most recent one being an appearance over a Coptic church in Cairo in December of 2009. In the following Christmas, there was a terrorist attack against the Coptic Christmas mass. It killed six people. Some of my informants had traveled there to see this reported miracle which went on for days, and others had seen the many videos of it which is spread on the video-sharing website youtube.com. My informants told me that she appeared in the form of light and a flock of doves. The dove is a symbol of St. Mary, and light is traditionally within Christianity seen as holiness, purity, and truth. In addition, her role as the mother is important since she cares for her people and protects them against social threats (Meinardus 2002:9). One informant said:

"It is very common for St. Mary to appear. She is the one that comes the most. She is the mother of God. She is the greatest of saints. She is our mother. The general message is that the Church in heaven and God is watching over us."

Pictures of this miracle also figured in a music video on Coptic television where the lyrics was that one must be like Christ and stand by one's faith in spite of persecution. These miracles are interpreted as a sign of God's love for his people and an encouragement to keep resisting the evildoers. The Copts also see these reported miracles as a confirmation of the righteousness of their beliefs in comparison to the Muslim faith. Therefore, the celebration of these miracles can be seen as a form of resistance against dominant religious belief and in particular the interpretations of Islam that consider Christianity to be the religion of the unfaithful.

Miracles intended to protect them from evildoers generally revolve around attacks on churches. One informant said: "We have seen the hand of God spread out, like with Moses. There were some guys who were trying to steal the cross from our church. My father who witnessed this said that he saw John the Baptist himself come down to protect it." Another informant told me a story about a miracle in his hometown in October of 2009. Some Christian boys had taken some sexual pictures of a Muslim girl and some Muslims had responded by attacking the church with petrol bombs. The church was at the time filled with worshipers who feared for their life. My informant then said that one of their canonized bishops had then been seen on the roof catching these bombs and miraculously saving the church. The interventions of saints have obvious miraculous aspects to it. However, due to their theological historical narration they also ascribe miraculous qualities to phenomena that appear to be more natural. One informant told me a story about when a bishop intended to build a new church. The problem was that a police officer came by the construction site and made clear to the bishop that he intended to put a halt to the construction. The bishop then warned him not to become the enemy of God: a warning that the man ignored. This man soon after this incident was killed in an accident, and the church construction could continue. My informant, therefore, considered this event to be a miracle. It is no coincidence that these miracles concern churches, since the Copts face many difficulties in building churches, and they are often the sights of religiously motivated communal violence. Therefore, they are potent symbols. Hence, these miracles show both God's love for his people and support in their cause. Therefore, the celebration of these miracles resists discriminatory policies on building churches, and they are perceived as divine support for the Copts in their cause.

The third type of interventionist miracle is when divine intervention is intended to punish the

evildoers. One informant said: "Sometimes when we don't get our rights from the court—we take it from the judge of God." The divine punishment is generally preceded by acts of violence. One informant told the following story: "After the persecution in January 2000 in Southern Egypt, where thirteen persons were murdered, people saw that fire tongues were jumping from Muslim house to Muslim house. Skipping the Christian houses and jumping to the next." Another informant told me a similar story. The Muslims in a village had burnt down a church and killed Christians. God had then intervened and sent heavenly fire to burn down the Muslim houses. In addition, as the Muslims tried to put the fire out it only grew in strength. Heavenly fire as a form of punishment must be seen in context of their religious historical narration, since it is a form of punishment God uses in Christian mythology. The bible reads: "Then the lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the lord out of heaven; (Genesis 19:24)." God destroyed the cities because the people were sinners whom had turned away from the righteous path. Furthermore, before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah he spared the few that were still faithful to him (Genesis 19:16). Due to the belief in God's omnipotence, it is logical to believe that he can intervene to bring justice on behalf of his people when they are being persecuted. One informant said: "The way I describe it is this: God almighty can do all things. It is just the way that it is understood in this culture. You do not need it [miracles] in the West. No one is persecuting you. We need it." The celebration of these miracles holds very strong judgments concerning good and evil. Furthermore, it quite clearly resists ideas of which religion represents the ultimate truth.

In Coptic Christianity, there is a cosmological connection between divine intervention and increased devotion to religious life. Heavenly rewards come to those who are faithful. Therefore, it is important to show one's commitment through prayers and fasting. The Copts believe that these rites can change the path of history. For example, the Copts believe that the prayers of St. Athanasius, the 20<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Alexandria caused the fall of the ruling Princes who had maintained a heterodox theology (Meinardus 2006:19). Another example is that they believe that the persistent prayers of the monks in the monastery of St. Macarius caused the fall of the despised Umayyad Dynasty. A very central myth within Coptic Christianity also illustrates this connection. This is a story that was retold to me in various versions by several of my informants. The story takes place in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the Muslim ruler Fatimid caliph al-Mu-izz li-Din Allah, makes an ultimatum to the Pope Abraham ibn Zur-ah. The ultimatum is that the Pope must move Muqattam Mountain or his people will be persecuted. In order to avoid persecution of his people the Pope accepts the challenge. The Copts then pray and fast for three days. On the third day, St. Mary appears to the Pope and leads him to a righteous man who will be able to perform the miracle. The man chosen by God to be his tool is a humble tanner. The Pope, the tanner, and the Coptic people

then join together and pray "God have mercy," and finally, the mountain moves (Shenouda 2007:590). Today, this mountain is believed to be situated outside Cairo, and is a pilgrimage site. In conclusion, there is a strong connection within Coptic faith that devotion to religious life can change the course of history. Furthermore, they believe that God has done and are capable of doing extraordinary miracles on the behalf of his people. Therefore, to devote oneself to religious life and pray for better times is an act of resistance since they believe that it can have empirical consequences on the conflict.

## 7.6 Conclusions

The Copts have since the 1950s decreased their participation in the political sphere, which they themselves attribute to being denied access to these spheres. This does not mean, however, that the problem has vanished. In contrast, it has become worse. Therefore, I have examined if acts of resistance can be found outside the conventional political and social spheres. Politics is certainly one arena of power commonly turned to when people want to achieve social change; however, it is not the only power sphere available. Within the ontological perception of the Copts, the most powerful arena of them all is the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, I have argued that the increased devotion to religious life among the Copts can be seen as a religious resistance movement. What distinguishes this movement from an ordinary religious movement is its strong emphasis on symbols and myths that communicates resistance against ideas of Islamic supremacy. Furthermore, they believe that this increased devotion to their God can influence the conflict on their behalf in either this life or the next. In my argument I firstly illustrated, that their religious revival, has paralleled an Islamic intellectual movement that contains elements of hostility against them. I further claimed that when studying the nature of this Coptic revival these phenomena does not seem to be simply correlated. Secondly, I illustrated the logic from their ontological perception of the world in turning to religious leaders, rather than forming a political movement outside the conventional political sphere. I then proceeded to discuss central symbols around which the Copts have formed their solidarity, arguing that they represented ideas of resistance. The first of these symbols was a historic identity which made primordial claims to the land on behalf of them as Christians, and therefore, resisting ideas of Egypt as an Islamic country. The second symbol I discussed was the symbol of the neo-martyr, which illustrates that they perceive this as a conflict that is not only a conflict of this world, but as a conflict of ultimate truths where they are the winners. Finally, I discussed the importance of contemporary miracles. I argued that because they perceive these miracles as a proof of their righteousness in this struggle, the celebration of these miracles is a form of resistance against the idea of them as the, *kafirs*, the unbelievers. Miracles

illustrate the cosmological connection between increased devotion to religious life, and changing the path of history.

## 9.0 CONCLUSIONS

"People come to me tired of this persecution and say that God has abandoned us, but I say to them: did you really ask God have mercy? Or did you ask Human Rights have mercy? United States have mercy? I want to see these people protesting in the streets go into their churches and get down on their knees and pray *Kirieli Ison* [God have mercy in Coptic]. Our ancestors once moved a mountain with their faith—we can do it again.

This quote is a part of a sermon given by a priest during a meeting with the young women of his church. The belief that faith can literally move mountains has powerful ramifications for the believers view on reality. The divine is not just abstract spiritual being, and reality is not only governed by human actions but primarily governed by a spiritual force which is capable of extraordinary things. From this cosmological perception, it is logical to turn to religion rather than human rights organization to resist discriminating elements within society. In this paper, I have argued the Coptic revival has central elements to it that can be regarded as a form of religious resistance movement. Their choice to resist through spiritual means is partly due to a cosmological belief in God's omnipotence in this life and the next. Furthermore, because they regard both the overall society and the state to have discriminating and hostile attitudes against them this has led to a withdrawal from social and political spheres, making the religious forum for resistance even more important.

Firstly, I argued that the Copts have not resisted through conventional social and political forums because that they experience that they are being discriminated in these forums. They feel that they are being denied political participation. In addition, they perceive that they are discriminated by the juridical system and the security apparatus, which makes them unwilling to turn to these forums to fight their cause. They feel that this is due to a discriminating culture that has its roots in ideas within Islam that are hostile against Christians. Furthermore, the Copts feel that the majority of Muslims are also a part of this discriminating culture. Therefore, they experience a threat to openly resist in other social forums because they fear violent retribution from extremist elements within society. The Coptic community suffers also suffers from internal fragmentation, which weakens the community and consequently their ability to resist through conventional political and social forums.

Secondly, I have argued that the religious revival of the Coptic Church has central elements to it that can be regarded as a religious resistance movement. During the last few decades, the Copts

have shown an increased devotion to religious life. This process has paralleled a development of heightened intolerance towards them. In this process, the Coptic community has gathered around religious leaders because they believe that the Church is the earthly manifestation of God's will. In addition, their religious revival has centered on religious symbols and myths that express a resistance against persecution. The first symbol is a historical identity, which makes primordial claims to the land on behalf of their religious group. The second is a glorification of the neo-martyr. This glorification takes control of the narration and turns the victim into the winner in the battle of ultimate truths. The third symbol is contemporary miracles where God is believed to intervene on their behalf in the conflict. In addition, there is a cosmological connection between these miracles, and increasing one's devotion to religious life. Therefore, I have argued that the Coptic religious revival is a resistance against intolerant ideas against them, and dominant ideas of what constitutes the ultimate truth.

To study forms of resistance that is not exercised within conventional political spheres is important in order to understand social change. In order to know where to look for resistance one must understand the ontological perceptions that govern society. In a highly religious society such as Egypt, where religious ideas govern essential parts of the social structure, it is logical that oppositional movements are also centered on cosmological ideas. A cosmological conviction that claims that this world is not important in comparison to the afterlife is not a belief that should be taken lightly, since it has fundamental effects on the believer's perception of reality. However, even in highly religious society cosmological beliefs are hardly the only factor influencing human behavior. Factors such as economy, politics and environmental factors are of course also important. My point is that we must study how these phenomena interact in the ontology of individuals. Egypt has recently gone through a historical political change. This might create a change in the ontological perceptions if this results in fundamental changes in Egyptian society and the Christians obtain full rights as citizens. However, recent terror actions against Coptic churches, and the government's passive reaction, indicate that it will be a long time before one can observe Copts as equal citizens in Egypt.

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